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SUBJECT: FORUM FOR THE FUTURE: NOVEMBER 11 SENIOR  
OFFICIALS MEETING

1. (U) SUMMARY: The Senior Officials Meeting of the BMENA Forum for the Future on November 11 finalized preparations for the Ministerial session the following day. Representatives of governments, civil society and the private sector reviewed progress on BMENA initiatives undertaken since last December's Forum in the areas of education, economy and democracy. There was general agreement that considerable progress had been made, with perhaps the most significant achievement being the cooperative atmosphere of constructive dialogue that has developed between civil society and governments. The USG explained plans to launch the Foundation for the Future (to support civil society) and the Fund for the Future (to support SMEs) on the margins of the Ministerial session. END SUMMARY.

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Overview  
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2. (U) The second annual Forum for the Future opened November 11 in Manama, Bahrain, with a Senior Officials Meeting to finalize preparations for the Ministerial meeting November 12. The Forum includes government representatives from the G8 and the countries of the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) as well as civil society and business representatives involved in BMENA activities. The Senior Officials Meeting was divided into four broad themes: Knowledge and Education; Finance Ministers Report; Civil Society and the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD); and discussion of the Foundation for the Future and Fund for the Future.

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Knowledge and Education  
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3. (U) Delegates provided an update on the Education Framework for Action, created at the May 2005 Dead Sea Ministerial in Jordan. Since that meeting, BMENA governments and their G-8 partners have held regular dialogues intended to move the agenda forward in three main areas: education quality, use of technology in the classroom, and inclusion of all segments of society, particularly women and girls. The Egyptians announced that they would host the next Ministerial, planned for May 2006 in Sharm el-Sheikh.

4. (U) The second segment focused on the elimination of illiteracy, with presentations made by the governments of Algeria and Afghanistan. Department of Education Deputy Chief of Staff Robin Gilchrist reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to work with countries in the region that make education reform a priority. This includes political commitment at the highest levels to provide quality education for every citizen in each country. She cited the No Child Left Behind Act, launched four years ago in the United States, as an example. Gilchrist further introduced the Global Learning Portal, a network to assist Arab educators to provide reliable educational resources at the national and international levels.

5. (U) The third segment centered on promoting youth skills for employment through a program called technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Delegates from Japan and Jordan discussed results from the G8-BMENA TVET workshop they co-sponsored in September, including identification of the major challenges facing the region. To address such problems as rising unemployment (which the Jordanian delegate said now totals 12.5 million people in Arab countries, including 32 percent of youth) and increasing poverty of semi-skilled workers, the German delegation explained the development of new training systems commensurate with today's complex work environment and the need for demand-driven rather than supply-driven training models.

6. (U) In the final segment, delegates from Morocco and Bahrain reported on the status of the two Entrepreneurship Centers planned in those countries. Conceived during the first Forum in Rabat, the proposed regional centers for training and supporting entrepreneurs have yet to be launched. The delegates reported that business plans have been completed and administrative structures have been put in

place, but the question of financing for the two institutes has delayed their opening. Delegates from the US and UK, two countries which have already provided financial support to establish the Centers, encouraged others government to contribute to the Centers.

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Outcome of Finance Ministers Meetings  
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17. (U) The UK provided an overview of discussions by BMENA Finance Ministers over the past year and turned to representatives of groups undertaking specific BMENA initiatives: The Arab Business Council (ABC), Arab Monetary Fund, International Finance Corporation (IFC), Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP), and UNDP. The ABC representative outlined five key challenges to improving the business environment in the region: job creation, pluralism, education, anti-corruption, and peace. The ABC is undertaking initiatives to address some of these, including the creation of country-specific National Competitiveness Councils and a G8-BMENA Investment Task Force. The ABC representative complained that the vision and mission of the Forum for the Future was unclear to business and asked for greater clarity on how the Forum would address issues of interest to the private sector.

18. (U) The IFC outlined progress in setting up the Private Enterprise Partnership (PEP MENA), including nine country offices and 59 projects. The OECD reported on the two rounds of Working Group meetings held in several sectors and plans for a Ministerial meeting on investment to be held in Jordan in 2006. UNDP plans to hold a meeting in Egypt in 2006 to reach conclusions on its series of workshops and seminars held on governance issues since 2003. EB PDAS Greenwood expressed USG support for these initiatives, noting MEPI funding of PEP MENA and consideration of funding for CGAP. He explained the USG's strong interest in promoting SMEs in the region, which is why we are pressing for creation of the Fund for the Future. Finally, Greenwood stressed the need to explore ways for government officials to interact with the business community regarding these initiatives, pointing out that it is the private sector that will ultimately create new jobs.

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Civil Society Thematic Meetings  
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19. (U) Civil Society representatives reported on the results of four thematic meetings held under the BMENA umbrella over the past year: Women's Empowerment, Transparency, Human Rights, and Rule of Law. The October meeting on Women's Empowerment in Manama identified 22 specific areas for potential action to strengthen the status of women as equal partners, many of which will constitute the agenda for a follow-up meeting in 2006. The Transparency representative noted the need for a working group to study how corruption is preventing countries from reaching the UN's Millennium Challenge goals. She also reported on the transparency meeting's call for the creation of a foundation to support civil society activities as well as establishing an NGO tasked with coordinating follow-up by civil society on anti-corruption issues.

110. (U) The Human Rights representative noted that one individual (Bahraini activist Abdul Hadi Al Khawaja) had been prevented from attending the human rights thematic meeting and pointed out that this had a negative impact on the credibility of the BMENA process. Following this intervention, the Bahraini chair responded that participants in the thematic meetings were supposed to represent organizations and large numbers of people, not just themselves, which was the case of the individual in question. The Human Rights rep reviewed priorities that emerged from the thematic meeting: reforming legislation on the registration and operation of NGOs, obstacles to freedom of expression and assembly, and an end to emergency laws and other extraordinary legislation. The Human Rights meeting had recommended creating networks of NGOs to monitor and report on these priority issues and financing public information campaigns in support of human rights issues.

111. (U) The Rule of Law (ROL) representative reported that its September meeting in Jordan had operated from the basis that civil society was interested in dialogue and not confrontation to resolve issues, but needed the freedom to operate, which is often not the case around the region. The ROL thematic meeting made specific recommendations on improving NGOs' ability to register and operate without administrative or judicial review. It also stressed the importance of judicial independence and called for the end of extraordinary courts and the simplification of rules and procedures in the judicial system.

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12. (U) Interventions by government and civil society coordinators of the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD) from Italy, Turkey, and Yemen all stressed the tremendous progress made since the DAD's launch at the Rabat Forum for the Future last year. The new spirit of cooperation and dialogue between government and civil society represents a true watershed for the BMENA region. The Turkish reps reported on efforts in support of women's empowerment and plans to hold the next meeting in 2006 with specific emphasis on gender equality. Italian NGO President Emma Bonino described the platform for action developed at the September meeting in Rabat, which should form the basis for further government-civil society cooperation.

13. (U) Several civil society representatives took the floor and echoed their satisfaction with the improved nature of cooperation with governments in the year since the DAD was launched. They all stressed concerns, however, about the lack of a mechanism to ensure follow-up on recommendations coming out of meetings with civil society. Almost all of the civil society and government reps during this session praised the creation of the Foundation for the Future as providing civil society with the financial ability to play its full role in the political process.

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Foundation for the Future  
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14. (U) NEA DAS Carpenter opened a session on the establishment of the Foundation for the Future and the Fund for the Future, both of which were scheduled to be formally announced by Secretary Rice the following day on the margins of the Ministerial. The Foundation will be an international, not-for-profit institution promoting freedom and democracy in the broader Middle East by issuing grants to NGOs, civil society organizations, individuals, and academic institutions. The Fund will provide equity to small-to-medium sized enterprises to support entrepreneurship and create jobs. A Draft Charter of Principles shaping the establishment of the Foundation was distributed for discussion, with the hope that more governments would commit to be partners in this project.

15. (U) A Kuwaiti government representative raised a question that was of interest and concern to other delegates; namely, with governments being called on to finance the Foundation, yet civil society organizations running its operations, what provisions would be put in place to ensure that those organizations do not undermine their own governments? The Egyptian delegation also noted that many countries have regulations on the funding of civil society groups, which would need to be reflected in the final agreement. DAS Carpenter closed the session by stating that the Foundation would be a completely independent organization with an independent board. He added that the USG was committed to work together with governments from the region and elsewhere and civil society organizations to jointly develop a mechanism to support the growth of civil society in the region.

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